



United States Mission to the OSCE

ODIHR Report on the Chechnya Referendum

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Douglas A. Davidson
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 27, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a pleasure to welcome both Ambassador Strohal and Mr. Balian to the Permanent Council this afternoon. In the case of the latter, we very much appreciate his willingness to perform his duty above and beyond the call of duty in this last valiant effort, and we hope he will be allowed to take up his newest duties in short order. In the case of the former, we equally appreciate his willingness to travel to Vienna today to speak with us about this very important issue. While we will obviously need additional time to fully consider the report he has given us today, we would like to take the opportunity to offer some of our initial reactions on the March 23 referendum in Chechnya.

Mr. Chairman, the U.S. Government has closely followed the preparations for the conduct of the referendum on a new constitution, and we are pleased that it took place without acts of violence or terrorism. We are also pleased that mobile ballot boxes were allowed to cross into Ingushetia to allow internally displaced persons to vote there.

Further, we have taken note today of the concerns expressed by Ambassador Strohal about some of the processes and procedures with regard to the organization and conduct of the referendum. We are certainly not in a position to comment on the accuracy of the Russian reports that the referendum received a 96 percent approval with a turnout of 79 percent of the electorate, given that of course, ODIHR itself was not in a position to fully observe the referendum.

We do, however, believe that most Chechens desire peace and an enduring political settlement to the current conflict. The aim of any political process must be to convince the Chechen people that it is a sincere and legitimate effort to end the violence, to end human rights abuses, to reconstruct the region, and to address legitimate grievances.

The holding of the referendum underscores the continued need for the Russian government to broaden the dialogue, engaging at least some of those who have supported the separatist cause in that process.

We thus hope that this referendum has begun the search for a broad political process creating institutions of self-government acceptable to the people of Chechnya. We are encouraged by the proposals on the elements of a political settlement made by President Putin and other senior Russian officials in the run-up to the referendum, and we urge the Russian government to follow through on these proposals.

Mr. Chairman, the United States continues to believe that the OSCE can assist the Russian government and local Chechen authorities in reconstruction and economic development, in the building up of democratic institutions and in the promotion of human rights.

We would like to hear more of the ideas of Ambassador Strohal for possible areas of future cooperation in Chechnya, following from ODIHR's observations, which the Ambassador has spoken to us about today and drawing from lessons learned during the past two trips to the region.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.